DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 066 079 FL 003 354

AUTHOR	Carrington, L. D.; And Others
TITLE	Linguistic Exposure of Trinidadian Children.
INSTITUTION	University of the West Indies, St. Augustine (Trinidad). Inst. of Education.
REPORT NO	P-15
PUB DATE	Apr 72
NOTE	25p.
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS	African Languages; *Children; Chinese; Creoles; Cultural Background; *English (Second Language); French; Hindi; Instructional Materials; *Language Instruction; *Language Planning; Language Research; Language Role; *Multilingualism; Questionnaires; Spanish; Tables (Data); Teacher Education; Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS	*Trinidad

ABSTRACT

The great diversity in the linguistic backgrounds of children in Trinidad could be a significant factor in problems in English language learning and teaching. To investigate this possibility, teachers have been completing questionnaires concerning the linguistic background and regular exposure to Hindi, French Creole, Spanish, or Chinese, of some of their pupils. The findings of the survey can have implications for language courses, instructional materials, teacher education, and teaching methods. (VM)

ED 066079

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PROJECT 15

LINGUISTIC EXPOSURE OF TRINIDADIAN CHILDREN

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APRIL 1972

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LINGUISTIC EXPOSURE

OF TRINIDADIAN CHILDREN*

THE HERITAGE

Comments on nineteenth (19th) century Trinidad in historical documents and social commentaries make adequate reference to the multilingual nature of the society at that time. Gamble (1866) states that:

> "There are men from all quarters of the globe, and with little exaggeration, it may be said that in Trinidad, all the languages of the earth are spoken".[1]

*This paper is a by-product of an on-going research project directed at studying problems in learning and teaching the English Language in Trinidad and Tobago. The project personnel themselves were surprised at the current degree of exposure of children in the 5 - 11+ age range to languages other than English and consequently felt it worthwhile to disseminate the information, although this is not the purpose for which it was originally collected.

The comments in the paper are restricted to Trinidad since no children in the Tobago sample admitted exposure to languages other than English.

[1] Gamble, W.H. Trinidad: Historical and Descriptive, Yates and Alexander, London 1866 p. 28

Gamble exaggerates a trifle more than his qualification would suggest but the number of languages spoken here up to the end of the nineteenth (19th) century excuses him. A minimum list based on available information would include the following: English, German, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Ibo, Congo, Yoruba, Hindi (Urdu), Bengali, Telegu, Tamil, Chinese, French Creole. The extent to which these languages were being used is also documented and it is clear that there were official concessions to the multilingual situation and that public life was not exclusively in the official language. In fact, English only began to gain ground at the very beginning of the twentieth (20th) century.

Herskovits (1947) notes that:

> "...Little was changed when the English took over. French and Spanish residents, undisturbed, continued to dominate the life there. English became the official language, but for most of the people, particularly the Negroes, "creole", the Negro-French patois heard in all the West Indias, was the language most widely, if not exclusively employed, especially outside of Port of Spain."[2]

The official adoption of English took place a full twenty-five (25) years after the British capture and in the interim the French dominated the society.

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[2] Herskovits, M.J. and F.S. Trinidad Village Alfred Knopf, New York 1947 p. 18

"The colony in the meantime, had rapidly progressed, being French in everything but government; in fact, the French had, in a great measure, superseded the Spanish language, and all public documents were published in both languages. Even after the capitulation of the island to the British forces, the French idiom was preserved together with that of the conquerors, for all public purposes until the year 1823, when the English language was exclusively adopted."[3]

A fourth European language, Portuguese, came into the island around 1846 when approximately two hundred Madeirans immigrated to the colony. The linguistic importance of this input appears to have been small for it does not seem that the language was learnt by others outside the group.

Gamble was more concerned with differences of character between tribes than with their language and it is on the former that he elaborates. But he does comment on the languages of the Africans, identifying "Yarrabas, Eboes, Congoes" [4]

"In Trinidad we have Africans, but of many different tribes, speaking different dialects, and with very marked differences in character."[4]

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[3] Gamble, W.H. op cit p. 17
[4] Gamble, W.H. op cit p. 30

Winford (1972) [5] notes that Africans arriving between 1838 and 1861 numbered somewhat over 8,000. If one is to judge by the success of Warner (1967)[6] in finding survivals of African languages in Trinidad, Yoruba would have been the most important.

The fact that African languages did not have a very good survival rate is of considerable interest to linguists and sociologists, but discussion of this point takes us away from our main concern. It is enough to note that the necessity for intergroup communication required the use of a common language by the Africans. French Creole, and later English fulfilled this role.

The arrival of Indian indentured labour from 1845 further enriched the linguistic diversity, by adding Hindi, Tamil, Telegu, and Bengali to Trinidad's repertoire.

"The Bengalis speak Hindustani and Bengali, while the inhabitants of the Madras Presidency speak Tamil, a totally different language. When these people meet in Trinidad, it strikes one as somewhat strange that they have to point to water and rice and ask each other what they call it in their language."[7]

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[5] Winford D. A Sociolinguistic Description of Two Communities in Trinidad. Unpublished D. Phil dissertation, Univ. of York 1972 p. 14-15.

[6] Warner, M.P. Language in Trinidad with special reference to English. Unpublished M. Phil thesis, Univ. of York 1967.

[7] Gamble, W.H. op cit p. 33

The presence of Telegu, is attested by Warner.[8]

Inevitably, a situation as complex as this had to force the acceptance of a common language and the efforts of the heterogeneous population of Trinidad to learn English are also noted by writers. Thus Gamble comments on the Indians as follows:

"The Tamil speaking Coolies (sic) speak English very readily, and considering all things, very correctly. The Bengalis on the other hand, seldom attempt to speak English except by translating into their own idiom, and using their own syntax."[9]

He comments on the infrequency with which African languages were heard in the city.

"I have heard some of the clerks speak some of the African dialects; but generally there is not much occasion for this, as the African especially the Yarriba, is apt in learning languages".[10]

In the midst of this Babel, to which was added Chinese in several increasingly large waves between 1806 and 1866, the constant point of reference was French Creole. It was the

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[8] Warner, M.P. op cit p. 44
[9] Gamble, W.H. op cit p. 34
[10] Gamble, W.H. op cit p. 38
For Gamble's comments on the interaction of all these languages see Appendix A.

lingua franca of the Africans, was used by Europeans and acquired also by the Indians but not to the exclusion of the latter's own languages.

OFFICIAL POLICY

Official Government policy recognised the multilingual nature of the country for purposes of the law and commerce. Keenan (1869) noted that there were eight (8) sworn interpreters of French, nine (9) of Spanish, one (1) of German, and one (1) of Hindustani at the time that he visited the colony. Yet for purposes of education, and especially for language teaching there is no evidence in the nineteenth (19th) century of any concessions in teaching approaches to the many languages spoken by the population. Keenan expressed his dismay as follows:

"In point of fact, the place is quite a Babel. The operation of the Ward schools has, no doubt, extended the use of English to districts where English has been previously unknown. But the diffusion of the English language has been accomplished by the most irrational process that could possibly be conceived. French and Spanish speaking children have been set to learn English alphabets, English spelling and English reading without the slightest reference whatever, in the explanation of a word or the translation of a phrase, to the only language, which they could speak or understand .....In some schools the reading is a mere mechanical

mechanical repetition of words suggestive of no meaning, no idea, no sign of intelligence or pleasure. After years of schooling, the mind of a child under the circumstances is still a tabula rasa. If there were local managers, this brainsick system of instruction could not survive long. No intelligent person could pay an occasional visit to a school, and without an effort towards its correction, witness a routine which produces only vexation and torpidity of intellect. The desire of every lover of the colony must be to see that all the inhabitants speak English. But a language cannot be infused into the human mind by the power of a battering ram. Rational measures must be employed. And my firm conviction is that if the French and Spanish speaking children were first taught to read their vernacular language, and then taught English through its medium, they would acquire a facile use of English with incalculable rapidity."[11] It is distressing that the spirit of Keenan's comments is still valid today, despite the absence of foreign 'managers' (in the broadest sense). Apart from expressing dismay, his forceful statement can only be viewed as a positive recommendation for infant education in the mother tongue before the introduction of English to the child.

[11] Keenan, P.J. Report on Education in Trinidad (1869) cited in Gordon S.C. Reports and repercussions in West Indian Education 1835-1933 Ginn & Co. London 1968.

But such rational suggestions would not be accepted in 1869, and in 1933 Marriot and Mayhew in commenting on the teaching of English were equally critical of this subject area, although they did not make as fundamental a recommendation as Keenan.

"It is mainly on the English lessons that the schools must depend not only for general information but also for 'culture'. No subject is worse taught at present. There is no reason why the primary school pupil should lack means for intelligent enjoyment and understanding of life outside his immediate environment if the readers are carefully selected and used and if the teachers are properly educated and supervised. The English syllabus needs complete recasting and careful statement of aims, which must emphasize a capacity for intelligent reading, a taste for reading, and the art of dear and simple expression. It is equally important that it should exclude a fragmentary knowledge of the names and dates of famous authors and all grammar such as the feminine of 'Administrator', 'Swain' and 'Husbandman' or the parsing of "Good Heavens" which is not directly conducive to intelligent reading, speech and writing".[12]

[12] Mayhew, A. & Marriot, F.C. Report of a Commission appointed to consider problems of secondary and primary education in Trinidad and Tobago, the Leeward and Windward Islands. London HMSO Col No 79 1933 Sec 115

The continued use of a curriculum which is incompatible with such a linguistic heritage proves that at an official level there has never been any serious attempt to respond to the adverse criticisms of official commissioners by designing a syllabus which would allow children to acquire the official language with a minimum of difficulty. The language arts syllabus in use in Trinidad and Tobago makes the erroneous assumption that the mother tongue of the learners is English,[13] and for all practical purposes the population of Trinidad is treated as if it were English speaking. Granted a form of English has been its major language for several decades, but there is still measurably high usage of languages other than English.

Certainly in the case of Hindi, official notice of the number of Hindi speakers was the source of some contention at the political level. In 1943, the Franchise Committee under the Chairmanship of Sir Lennox O'Reilly included as one of the provisions for extended franchise, a clause requiring that a potential voter should be able to satisfy the registering officer that he or she could

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[13] This is treated at greater length in an earlier publication by this team. See Carrington, L.D., Borely, C.B., and Knight, H.E. Away Robin Run! A Critical Description of the Teaching of Language Arts in the Primary Schools of Trinidad and Tobago, Institute of Education, Trinidad, February 1972 pp 60 mimeo

understand the English language when spoken. The Indian population protested against the clause. The proposal by the Secretary of State that it be removed was defeated more than once in the Legislative Council and it was only after a vigorous campaign by the Indian Central Committee that the bar was removed in mid 1945.[14]

THE LEGACY

Present-day Trinidad is considerably less diverse in language than it was in the nineteenth (19th) century but more complex than many imagine. There are still large numbers of Hindi - Urdu speakers, a smaller number of French Creole speakers and even fewer Spanish speakers.

HINDI

Niehoff (1960)[15] discusses the importance of Hindi (-Urdu) in Trinidad, the difficulties of teaching it and some attitudes towards it. In Niehoff's terms the language is weakening rapidly from a cultural point of view but our own research indicates that it is still to be reckoned with in educational planning. Even though the use of the language by the younger generation may be

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[14] See Kirpalani, M.J., Sinanan, M.G., Rameshwar, S.M. and Seukeran, L.F. Editors Indian Centenary Review- One Hundred Years of Progress 1845-1945 Trinidad B.W. Guardian Commercial Printery P.O.S. 1945 p. 109

[15] Niehoff, A. and J. East Indians in the West Indies Milwaukee Public Museum 1960 p.84-87

mainly to communicate with their elders, the importance of the language for religious purposes, and its reinforcement by the popularity of Indian films since the 1930's, requires that planners should be more concerned about the implications of its existence.

We are not i a position to say to what extent the Hindi spoken here is homogeneous or how much it differs from the language known by the same name as it is spoken in India, but we can guess that after one hundred and thirty years in Trinidad, the influence of French Creole and English will have affected the everyday language to some extent.

FRENCH CREOLE[16]

The geographical distribution of French Creole in Trinidad shows the extent to which it has receded from the mainstream of social activity. It is spoken in a number of valleys in the Northern range, mainly Maraval, Santa Cruz, Maracas, Caura, Lopinot, Brasso Seco; in a few coastal areas such as Las Cuevas, Matelot, Blanchisseuse, Toco, Mayaro, Erin; and in inland areas such as Las Lomas. In many of these areas it coexists with Spanish. Few persons, other than the elderly, use it regularly as a major medium of communication.

[16]For description of this creole see Thomas J.J. The Theory and Practice of Creole Grammar New Beacon Books Ltd. London 1969. (originally published Port of Spain 1869).

SPANISH

Trinidad Spanish is also restricted in its number of speakers and its distribution is similar to that of French Creole: Lopinot, Erin, Moruga, Las Lomas, Brazil, Brasso Seco. Thompson (1957)[17] notes that it is never spoken by monoglots and that its use by persons below middle age is rare. Our own work supports Thompson's observations and for all practical educational purposes the importance of Spanish is negligible.

ENGLISH

The term 'English' is used as the general cover term for the regional variety of that language used in formal situations by educated speakers[18] as well as for the several varieties of vernacular speech used by the mass of the population. The vernacular has been partially described by Solomon (1966)[19] Warner (1967)[20] and Winford (1972).[21] English,

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[17] Thompson, R.W. "A Preliminary Survey of the Spanish Dialect of Trinidad" Orbis Tome III No. 2 1957 p.353-371. See also: Moodie, S.M. El Español hablado en Trinidad unpublished Ph.D. diss. Univ. of Madrid 1970.

[18] Le Page (1955) records that the then Dept. of Education in Port of Spain estimated that 15% of the school population spoke an approximation to "Standard English" as their natural tongue. See Le Page, R.B. "The Language Problem of the British Caribbean" Caribbean Quarterly Vol. 4, No. 1, 1955 p. 40-44.

[19] Solomon, D.V. The System of Predication in the Speech of Trinidad - A Quantitative Study in Decreolization. unpublished M.A. Thesis Columbia Univ. 1966 80p.

[20] Warner, M.P. op cit

[21] Winford, D. op cit

the official language, is the target language of education. There is no generally accepted term in popular use which distinguishes the vernacular from standard and most persons would not accept that the two are structurally speaking different languages.[22]

The Institute of Education of the University of the West Indies has been conducting research into problems of English language learning and teaching in Trinidad and Tobago. One of the variables being examined is the difference in linguistic backgrounds. In order to obtain information about the linguistic background of informants in the project a questionnaire[23] requesting information on the languages other than English to which each informant was exposed was completed by each child's teacher. The teacher sought the information, either directly from the informant,[24] from an older brother or sister in the same school, or from the parents of the child (the latter in a restricted number of cases).

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[22] For this reason, in this study the questionnaire that was used did not invite distinction between 'standard' and vernacular. Both were covered by the term English.

[23] See Appendix B

[24] The informants were selected randomly from each class between the infants and fifth standard (ages 5 - 11+) in twenty-five schools chosen in a stratified random sample based on the distribution of schools in the educational administrative districts of the island. See also Carrington, L.D. and Borely, C.B. An Investigation of English Language Learning and Teaching Problems in Trinidad and Tobago. Progress Report, U.W.I. Institute of Education October 1969, p. 10-12, 66-68.

EXPOSURE OF INFORMANTS

An informant is viewed as having exposure to a language if he or she either -

1. speaks the language;
2. is addressed by members of his family or household in the language;
3. hears the language used by members of his family or household.

Exposure to the language is accordingly divided into three types.

Type I - Active Control

Type I includes all informants who are exposed to a language to the extent that they actually speak that language. Degree of competence is not considered in the classification; instead sub-division of exposure types is based on persons with whom the language is used. If an informant's household uses the language to the extent that the informant converses with siblings in the language, his exposure is considered greater than if he converses only with (a) his parents or (b) his grandparents or (c) other relatives or persons, (in descending order) in that language. It is clear then that exposure listed as Type I includes the exposures described as Types II and III below, and that Type II includes Type III.

Type II - Comprehension

Type II includes all informants who claim not to speak a language other than English but state that they are addressed in such a language by members of their family or household. Again here the degree of exposure depends upon whether the person addressing the informant is sibling, parent, grandparent or other.

Type III - Familiarity

Those informants who neither speak nor are addressed in a language other than English but who hear the language used by members of their household are classed similarly as Type III.

ANALYSIS OF DATA

The following tabulations indicate the exposure of informants to languages other than English. The total number of informants in the twenty-five (25) school sample is eight hundred and seventeen (817).

I

Exposure Type I	Active Control				
Language spoken with:	Hindi	French Creole	Spanish	Chinese	Total
siblings	5	6	-	1	12
both parents	4	2	-	-	6
one parent	3	-	-	-	3
grand-parent(s)	7	1	-	1	9
other relative/person	4	-	-	-	4
Total	23	9	0	2	34

II

Exposure Type II	Comprehension				
Informant addressed by:	Hindi	French Creole	Spanish	Chinese	Total
siblings	6	-	-	-	6
both parents	10	1	2	-	13
one parent	7	3	3	-	13
grand parent(s)	32	4	-	-	36
other relative/person	10	1	-	-	11
Total	65	9	5	0	79

III

Exposure Type III	Familiarity				
Informant hears language used by:	Hindi	French Creole	Spanish	Chinese	Total
siblings	14	9	2	-	25
both parents	169	46	3	3	221
one parent	44	42	6	-	92
grandparent(s)	46	34	2	-	82
other relative/person	6	17	-	-	33
Total	289	148	13	3	453

IV

Totals All Exposures	Hindi	French Creole	Spanish	Chinese	Total
	377	166	18	5	566

V

Percentage* of total sample exposed to a language other than English tabulated according to language and exposure type.

	Hindi	French Creole	Spanish	Chinese	Total
Type I	2.82	1.10	0.00	0.24	4.16
Type II	7.97	1.10	0.61	0.00	9.67
Type III	35.37	18.12	1.59	0.36	55.45
Total	46.16	20.32	2.20	0.60	69.28

*correct to two decimal places

The questionnaire used in this study was a crude instrument for determining exposure to a language since no information about frequency of usage or degree of competence was sought. Furthermore, sampling was based on the distribution of schools throughout the island rather than on the distribution of population in the age group under study.

The figure of 69.28% as a total must not be interpreted to mean that this is the extent to which the entire population is exposed to languages other than English. Even so, the figures are far higher than anticipated.

The implications of such widespread and varied exposure of young Trinidadian children to languages other than English are that the theoretical assumptions underlying language syllabuses and teaching materials must cater to the fact that for a large percentage of the population, standard English is not a mother tongue. Consequently, the training of teaching personnel must provide specific orientation of teachers to the pedagogical problems of multi-dialectalism and methods of teaching English in such situations.

Later publications of the Institute of Education will analyse the language of children in Trinidad and Tobago and the implications for the education of children and teachers.

Institute of Education
St. Augustine
April 1972

APPENDIX A

i

"The language of government and law is English. The language of the Creoles of the island is French, not pure French, but a patois, and one which is dissimilar from all other patois. The nouns, for the most part, are the same as in good French, but the verbs and particles are sui generis. A Frenchman, himself, is probably more surprised than one not thoroughly acquainted with French, at the strange sounds which greet his ear upon first conversing with the people of Trinidad. He is led to doubt his ears; he thinks he is listening to French, but he has to ask many questions, and to listen attentively before he can understand all that is said. But those who are au fait at it, speak highly of it, and say that it is very expressive and concise. There are some who think that the Trinidad patois is worthy of being raised to the dignity of a language; and it is doubtful whether one of the most intelligent and learned of the Trinidadians does not entertain the purpose of writing a grammar and a dictionary of this dialect. The chief peculiarity of this tongue is, that the verbs have no inflections or terminations, but the tenses are made by particles affixed or prefixed. There

is, also, a mixture of Spanish and Indian words, which makes it more troublesome to understand. Still no one who knows French is long perplexed with its difficulties. This is the language spoken most widely, the lower orders scarcely using any other, though they can nearly all of them speak English. But among themselves this patois is the medium of thought. It is, moreover the language which the African and the Coolie, and the stranger in general, learns first, and of course for the simple reason that he hears it most frequently spoken. Its interperative epithets are numerous and forcible; and I am afraid are the best known, because the most frequently in use.

Spanish is largely spoken in certain districts and villages, in which the people are almost entirely of Spanish descent. In the drygoods stores as they are called, the linen-drapers, Spanish is in constant use, for some of the best customers - the largest buyers - come from the Main, where Spani. . is the only language in common use. Clerks in stores, therefore, must be familiarly acquainted with English, French and Spanish and ninety-nine out of a hundred clerks can sell in these three different languages. Since the Coolies and Chinese have come to the country, many clerks have managed

to learn to speak a few words of Coolie as they term it, meaning, of course, Bengali. They can just manage to count in Bengali, but in the Tamil and Chinese nothing can be done. These languages are not very much spoken in buying, for the Chinese and the Madras or Tamil-speaking Coolies learn to speak English with much greater ease and quickness than their language can be learnt by the people. I have heard some of the clerks speak some of the African dialects: but generally there is not much occasion for this, as the African, especially the Yarriba, is apt in learning languages. There are a good many Portuguese in the island, and many of them who speak only their own language. Anyone, however, who is familiar with Spanish can understand, and be understood by, a Portuguese. There seems to be more difference in the accent than in the vocabularies or structure of the two languages, the Spanish being both sweet and sonorous, while the Portuguese is to foreign ears drawling and nasal.

The Chinese is, unquestionably the most difficult of the languages we have here; and the Chinese certainly have the advantage of understanding us, while we cannot hear a word they say. In such a Babel-like country interpreters are needed. There are many of them, and much

employment is found them in the courts of the law, and in business transactions. In the public papers French and Spanish correspondence is to be found; but for some years past the papers have ceased to appear, their articles printed in English and French on opposite pages as once they did.

Public worship is conducted in three different languages: in English by the Protestants generally; in French by the Catholics in their discourses; and in Portuguese by one of the Baptist missionaries and by the Minister of the Portuguese Free Church who, with his people, are refugees from Madeira, who fled that land to escape the persecuting hand of popery".

Gamble W.H. Trinidad: Historical and Descriptive Yates and Alexander, London 1866. p. 38-41

APPENDIX B

i

The following is a sample of the questionnaire used to collect information on the linguistic background of the informants.

NAME:

SEX:

AGE: years/months

HOME ADDRESS:

LENGTH OF TIME RESIDENT AT ABOVE ADDRESS:

IF RESIDENT IN AREA UNDER 1 YEAR, WHAT WAS PREVIOUS ADDRESS:

NAME OF PARENT OR GUARDIAN: (That is, person with whom child lives. If a relative, state relationship.)

DOES CHILD SPEAK ANY LANGUAGE OTHER THAN ENGLISH?

IF SO, WHAT LANGUAGE:

DOES FATHER SPEAK ANY LANGUAGE OTHER THAN ENGLISH:

DOES MOTHER SPEAK ANY LANGUAGE OTHER THAN ENGLISH:

DOES GUARDIAN SPEAK ANY LANGUAGE OTHER THAN ENGLISH:

DOES GRANDFATHER SPEAK ANY LANGUAGE OTHER THAN ENGLISH:

DOES GRANDMOTHER SPEAK ANY LANGUAGE OTHER THAN ENGLISH:

DOES ANY OTHER PERSON IN THE FAMILY SPEAK ANY LANGUAGE OTHER THAN ENGLISH:

	PERSON SPOKEN TO											
PERSON SPEAKING	CHILD	FATHER	MOTHER	BROTHER	SISTER	GRANDFATHER P.	GRANDFATHER M.	GRANDMOTHER P.	GRANDMOTHER M.	GUARDIAN
CHILD										
FATHER										
MOTHER										
BROTHER										
SISTER										
GRANDFATHER P.										
GRANDFATHER M.										
GRANDMOTHER P.										
GRANDMOTHER M.										
GUARDIAN										